

PREPARED BY
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INTERRUPTING GENERATIONAL HOMELESSNESS AMONG YOUNG FAMILIES THROUGH A TWO- GENERATION APPROACH:

OPPORTUNITIES
FOR IMPACT



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“I come from a background of extreme poverty and intergenerational homelessness. This means that my mother was born into homelessness and her mother was also born into homelessness. The trauma that my mother incurred from her childhood led her to cope with alcohol and drug use. This toxic mix of covering trauma with substance use kept us living in shelters or out of a suitcase in some stranger’s home. Unfortunately, there was no place to help my mother address her trauma. The shelter would kick us out for bed rotation at 7 in the morning and the liquor store was open by 9. I would go to school knowing that my only support system would be broken by the time I got out. All I wanted was peace for her because I knew it would mean stability for me.”

- Congressional Testimony of David Baker, Youth Advisory Council Member, National Network for Youth, and Support Specialist with the YMCA Youth & Family Services Department in San Diego, California, July 16, 2019



INTRODUCTION

Like David, too many children are born into a seemingly endless loop of homelessness – their parents’ past and present homelessness a prelude to their own. Without informed, coordinated, and strategic action, intergenerational homelessness will continue to rob children and young parents of their full potential, depriving them and our nation of real opportunities to fulfill their promise.

SchoolHouse Connection seeks to interrupt this cycle. Building on our past work to help children, youth, and families overcome homelessness, SchoolHouse Connection recently completed a six month research, analysis, and planning process to build our knowledge and identify next steps for our organization and the field. This included reviewing relevant research and soliciting expertise directly from young parents who have experienced homelessness, as well as from subject matter experts and providers working with young families experiencing homelessness. The planning process helped us determine the most effective and compelling activities that our national organization could undertake to interrupt generational homelessness.

"WE FOUND THAT NATIONAL AND LOCAL WORK TO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS DOES NOT MEET THE NEEDS OF YOUNG FAMILIES; THE FEW EFFORTS THAT DO EXIST ARE AIMED AT YOUNG FAMILIES WHO ARE ALREADY FAIRLY WELL CONNECTED TO PUBLIC SUPPORTS".

Our research and interviews with experts confirmed our initial belief that there are significant policy and practice gaps between the fields of homelessness, child development, education, and pregnant and parenting youth – gaps through which too many young families fall. We found that national and local work to address homelessness does not meet the needs of young families; the few efforts that do exist are aimed at young families who are already fairly well connected to public supports (e.g., programs run by public housing authorities). Similarly, programs for young parents and young children are generally not prepared to identify and respond to homelessness among their clients, particularly the more “hidden” forms of homelessness, such as doubling up, nor take into account the mobility inherent in homelessness. We present the findings of our research and outline our opportunities for impact below.

BACKGROUND



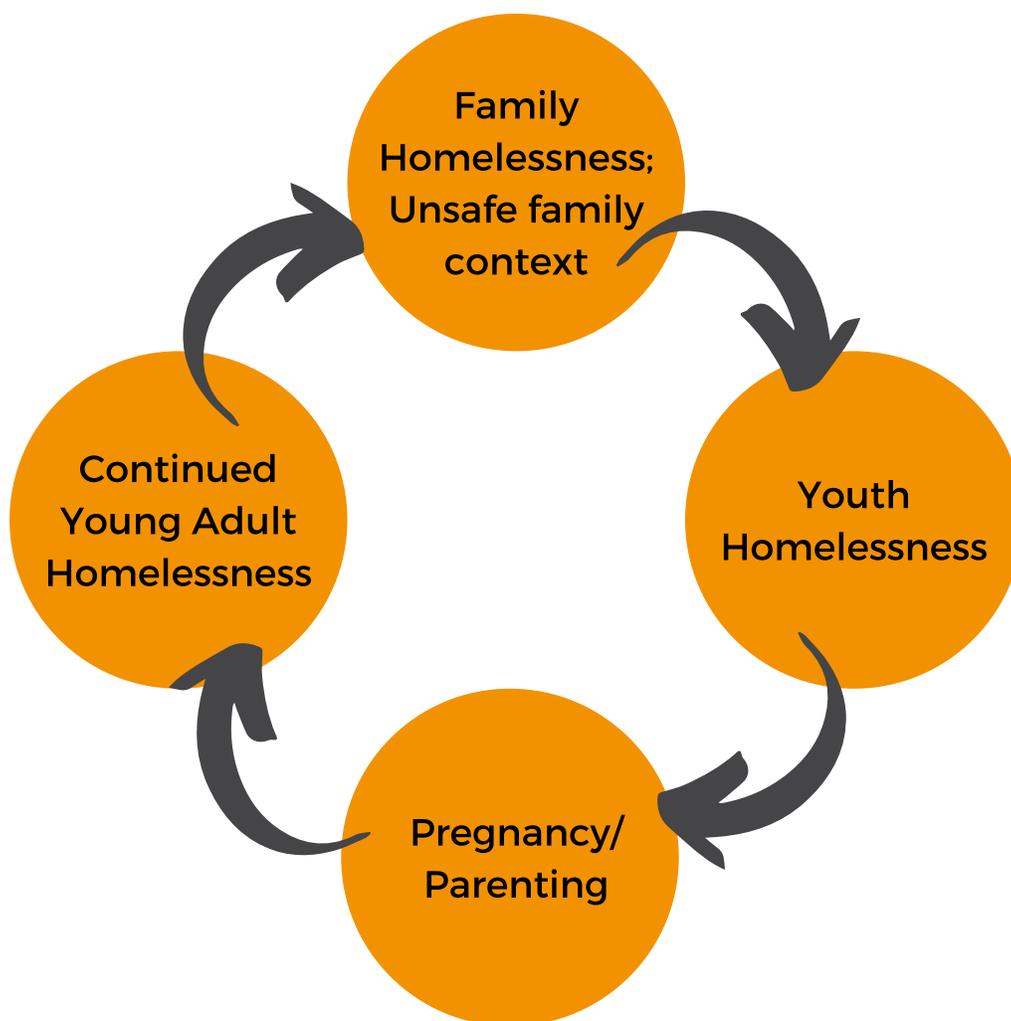
Approximately 1.1 million children have an 18- to 25-year-old parent who experienced homelessness during the past year.^[i] Among young adults experiencing homelessness, 43% of women and 29% of men have at least one child (compared to 22% of young women and 14% of young men who have not experienced homelessness).^[ii] Among teenagers experiencing homelessness (13- to 17- year-olds), 10% of girls and 3% of boys report having a partner who is pregnant or is a parent.

These young parents and their children are “young families:” parents under age 25 experiencing homelessness with their children. Both the children and their parents require comprehensive, developmentally-appropriate interventions to ensure that they thrive, and that they never experience homelessness again.

1.1 MILLION CHILDREN HAVE AN 18- TO 25-YEAR-OLD PARENT WHO EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS DURING THE PAST YEAR.



Most approaches to homelessness in the United States adopt the perspective of siloed populations: programs serve youth, or families, or single adults. However, people with lived experiences of homelessness emphasize that homelessness is not a static or siloed reality. Over the course of their lives, youth may experience homelessness alone, with their parents, and with their children. As children or as parents, youth are part of families. And whether their members live together or apart, families include youth. Research shows that the connections between child, youth, and family homelessness can create a cycle of homelessness.



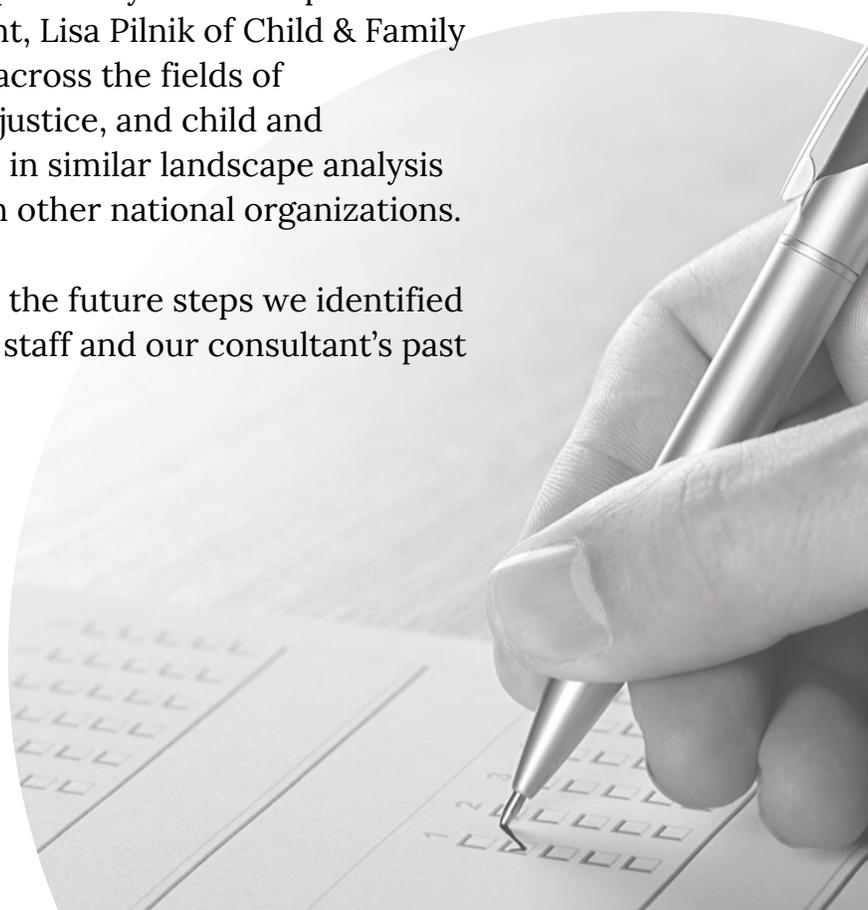
Most youth experiencing homelessness say that their homelessness grew out of volatile or unsafe family contexts that, over time, erupted into parental rejection, getting kicked out, or fleeing family conflict.[iii] Nearly one-quarter of youth first experienced family homelessness with their parents.[iv] Once homeless, youth are disproportionately likely to become pregnant and have children. Young parents have three times the risk of experiencing homelessness as young adults compared to their peers without children.[v]

HOW WE CONDUCTED OUR RESEARCH

To determine the most effective activities that we could undertake to interrupt the cycle of homelessness, SchoolHouse conducted a review of existing literature, interviewed national and regional experts, gathered survey information from nearly 70 service providers, and solicited input from young parents with lived experience. The survey was distributed through listservs by SchoolHouse Connection and its partners: Parents as Teachers, the National Head Start Association, and the National Fatherhood Initiative. Direct requests to complete the survey were also sent to programs identified through the literature review or by SHC staff.

SHC's work on this project was supported by a well-respected and experienced independent consultant, Lisa Pilnik of Child & Family Policy Associates. Ms. Pilnik works across the fields of homelessness, child welfare, youth justice, and child and adolescent health, and has engaged in similar landscape analysis and impact planning processes with other national organizations.

Our research, the analysis of it, and the future steps we identified as a result also drew heavily on our staff and our consultant's past work and expertise on these issues.



BARRIERS TO INTERRUPTING GENERATIONAL HOMELESSNESS AMONG YOUNG FAMILIES

We asked respondents to identify policy and/or practice barriers to serving young families experiencing homelessness, and how these barriers might differ from those encountered while serving (1) youth experiencing homelessness who are not pregnant/parenting, and (2) families experiencing homelessness who are headed by older parents. Our research revealed the following barriers to addressing homelessness among young children and their young parents.

BARRIER #1

Programs/services for young families experiencing homelessness are not available.

BARRIER #2

Programs/services that do exist do not meet the needs of young children and young parents experiencing homelessness.

BARRIER #3

Young families experiencing homelessness struggle to access those programs/services that are available.

BARRIER #4

There is an overall lack of focus on and knowledge of how to appropriately serve young parents and young children experiencing homelessness.

BARRIER #1:

Programs/services for young families experiencing homelessness are not available.

- Few programs serve minor parents.
- Few programs serve young parents with their partners, forcing families to separate.
- Rural areas in particular have few or no services for young families experiencing homelessness.



"If a young, two-parent family can secure a spot in a shelter, the father is often sent to another location because shelters divide their population by gender, disrupting the family unit unnecessarily and further traumatizing the family in crisis. Lack of affordable, quality child care is also a significant barrier that impacts young families during a homeless experience and beyond..."

- 2-Gen Survey Respondent

BARRIER #2:

Programs/services that do exist do not meet the needs of young children and young parents experiencing homelessness.

- Settings often are not appropriate or safe for young children (e.g., lack basic childproofing measures; suffer from pest infestations).
- Program rules often are not appropriate to the situation of young or expectant parents (e.g., no cell phones allowed).
- Stand-alone services (e.g., housing, vocational training) may be offered without the related services needed for youth to succeed over time (e.g., lack of connection to mental health services, quality early childhood education services, and personal finance education; provision of merely short-term housing subsidies that disappear over time without supporting young parents in obtaining employment that can allow them to pay market rate rent).
- Reliance on shared housing for young mothers and their children, which often fails as a long-term approach to stability (e.g., personality and parenting differences lead to conflict).



“When I went to my local ‘youth centered agency’ their program rules about confiscating phones in the evening forced me to decline their shelter placement, since I was 9 months pregnant at the time and due any day. Luckily, I was able to get placement at another local youth shelter because of hospitality funding. That really meant a lot to me. Unfortunately, that shelter didn’t allow children, so I was forced to find someone to live with or get my own place before I went into labor to avoid CPS involvement and most importantly, avoid giving birth to my precious child and not having a comfortable, prepared and stable place to bring her home to.”

-Young parent

BARRIER #3:

Young families experiencing homelessness struggle to access those programs/services that are available.

- Lack of transportation is a significant barrier everywhere, and particularly in rural areas.
- Young families can be difficult to identify, particularly if they are sharing housing with other people.
- Many young families experiencing homelessness do not meet the definition of “homelessness” used by programs funded through the Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Young families may not have necessary documentation for enrollment in programs/services.
- Services aren’t coordinated well (e.g. parents may be offered child care far from education, employment, and housing, thereby preventing them from obtaining access to all needed services).
- Services are provided or accessible in a chronological order that does not work for young parents (e.g. programs require parents first to be working or in training programs in order to access child care, but the parents can’t get a job or engage in credentialing programs without child care).
- Benefits “cliffs” remove supports when a certain income level is reached, even if the family still is not able to maintain housing and meet basic needs.



"When I tried to get shelter placement, my local DSS denied me, stating that because I had a job, I was unable to get placed."

- Young parent

BARRIER #4:

There is an overall lack of focus on and knowledge of how to appropriately serve young parents and young children experiencing homelessness.

- Homeless system staff serving families may have little training/knowledge on meeting the needs of young parents (e.g., recognizing that risk/reward systems in adolescent brains continue to develop into early adulthood) or very young children (e.g., recognizing the attachment and consistency needs of young children and the importance of a child's early years for lifelong development).
- Mainstream early childhood, education, and family providers may not be aware of statutory or regulatory policies/prioritizations for parents and children experiencing homelessness and/or may not be implementing them well (e.g., existing prioritization in Head Start/EHS for homelessness).
- Secondary and post-secondary education systems lack appropriate services to support young parents and their children, particularly services for young parents seeking to advance their education in pursuit of career growth and economic independence.



"I can't expect a young parent to know how to play a game with her child if no one has played a game with her. I can't expect a young parent to maintain clean baby bottles if she's never washed dishes. We always start from the beginning. We utilize modeling and repetitions throughout our interventions."

**- 2-Gen Survey
Respondent**



EACH OF THESE BARRIERS IS A SIGNIFICANT IMPEDIMENT TO INTERRUPTING THE CYCLE OF HOMELESSNESS AMONG YOUNG FAMILIES. TO OVERCOME THEM, A COORDINATED NATIONAL STRATEGY THAT BUILDS ON EXISTING KNOWLEDGE IN THE FIELD IS ESSENTIAL.

SIX KEY PRINCIPLES FOR INTERRUPTING GENERATIONAL HOMELESSNESS AMONG YOUNG FAMILIES THROUGH A TWO-GENERATION APPROACH

Existing research strongly supports connecting young families to “whole family” or “two-generation” programming in which supportive services and developmentally appropriate interventions are provided both to the parents and the children, as well as to the family as a unit.[vi]

Our research – interviews, surveys, and literature review -- uncovered critical insights about the application of a two-generation approach to young families experiencing homelessness. We have combined and condensed those insights into the following key principles:

KEY PRINCIPLE #1

Services and assessments must address the developmental and other needs of both parents and children: young parents and young children have distinct, individual needs, based on their stage of development, as well as collective needs as a family unit.

KEY PRINCIPLE #2

Service provision must be coordinated to facilitate access and maximize benefits to both children and parents, and be strengths-based.

KEY PRINCIPLE #3

Service availability must expand so that the needs of parents and children in all young families experiencing homelessness can be met, and future homelessness can be prevented.



KEY PRINCIPLE #4

Both policy and practice must shift toward supporting long-term outcomes for young families.

KEY PRINCIPLE #5

Both policy and practice must be guided by parents and children with lived homelessness experience.

KEY PRINCIPLE #6

Education is essential to lifting children and young parents out of homelessness and positioning them for lifelong success.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPACT BY A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION

Through our research review, outreach, survey, and feedback directly from young parents who have experienced homelessness, SchoolHouse Connection identified the following key strategies for our work to interrupt generational homelessness among young families. Although these strategies apply generally to young families headed by minor parents, some strategies will need to be tailored and/or adapted to reflect the legal status and unique circumstances of minors. In addition, strategies will need to focus intentionally on racial equity and inclusion, as well as rural, urban, and suburban contexts.



STRATEGY #1 **Create a national focus on young families experiencing homelessness.**

- Engage in national coalitions and with national groups working on two-generation approaches to inject young families experiencing homelessness into existing efforts.
- Partner with existing national coalitions and efforts on family homelessness, and with existing national coalitions and efforts on youth homelessness, to ensure that they incorporate the needs of young children and young parents, using a two-generation approach.
- Launch media and communications campaigns that tell the human story of young family homelessness (parent and child), the impacts on both young children and young parents, and strategies to address it.



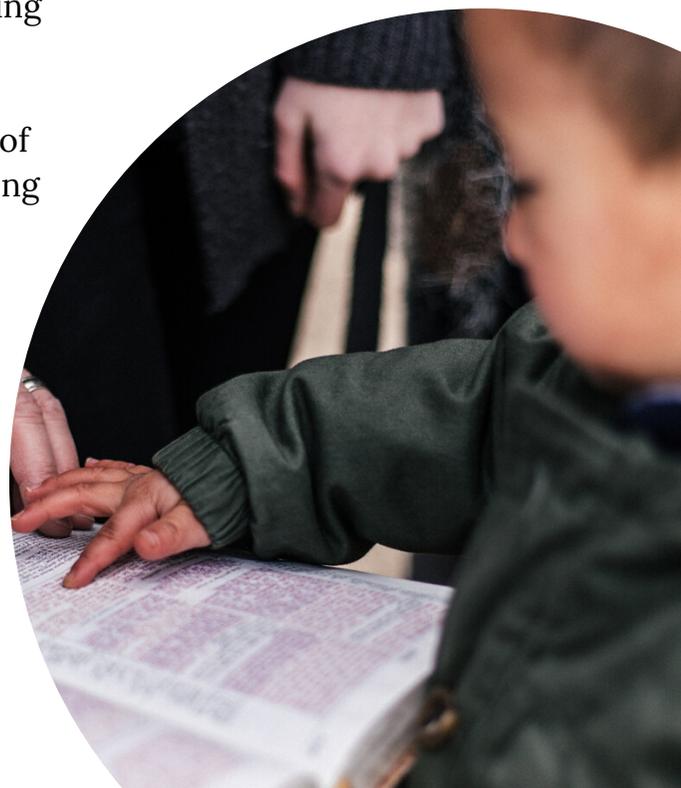
STRATEGY #2 **Engage in targeted federal and state policy advocacy.**



- Advocate for federal and state policies to prioritize/maximize access to programs/services for young parents and young children, and to address the barriers that keep young families – including young families headed by minor parents – from exiting or avoiding homelessness.
- Develop model or sample laws and policies to share with state legislatures and administrative agencies.
- Provide targeted policy support to state and local advocates (e.g., technical assistance advocating for policy change at the local or state level).
- Promote policies that ensure that key services offered to youth and young adults (e.g., housing, education, job training), are paired with the long-term supports needed to sustain impact (e.g. coaching/mentoring, wrap-around services, service navigation assistance, job placement, personal finance/budgeting, transportation, coaching/mentoring, help with substance abuse or mental health challenges).

STRATEGY #3 **Support cross-system,
collaborative work.**

- Partner with states and/or local communities to establish cross-sector task forces or workgroups that can provide dedicated support to create the capacity necessary for effective intersectional work. Initial activities could include regular information-sharing; mapping available services for young children and young parents; identifying barriers to services; and working together on solutions to those barriers. Shared funding and co-location of services could follow.
- Support cross-sector training (e.g., for homelessness providers on adolescent parenting and child development; for parenting programs on identifying and responding to homelessness). This would include webinars, resources, and a virtual learning community of professionals to share ideas, advice, etc. among peers.
- Convene in person and virtual cross-sector meetings at state, regional, and/or national levels to develop, discuss, and publicize innovations and collaborative, intersectional solutions.



STRATEGY #4 **Identify, evaluate, develop, and strategically scale up best practices for serving young families experiencing homelessness.**

- Identify, evaluate, develop, and strategically scale up best practices for serving young families experiencing homelessness through resource materials, checklists, brief assessments, or other tools. Best practices are those whose outcomes have sustained positive impacts in interrupting young family homelessness, and that contribute to family preservation, healthy child development, and lasting self-sufficiency.
- Perform research on innovations and best practices on serving young parents, including minor parents, experiencing homelessness in housing and education programs.
- Identify, develop, and promote strategies to improve access to quality child care and quality early childhood education for young children from birth to age six.
- Identify, develop, and promote strategies to increase access to and success in secondary and post-secondary education (including colleges, universities and high-quality vocational training) that will provide access to family-sustaining wages;
- Identify, develop, and promote strategies to improve access to parenting education (e.g., on child development) for young parents; and
- Identify, develop, and promote strategies to improve access to quality early childhood education for young children from birth to age six.



TOWARD THE FUTURE

Through our research, we have identified significant policy and practice gaps between the fields of homelessness, child development, education, and pregnant and parenting youth – **a gap that requires dedicated action if we are to interrupt generational homelessness and prevent the tragic loss of human potential for children and parents alike.** What we have learned in this planning process will guide our future work, and we welcome opportunities to partner with other organizations at the national, state, and local level who are interested in tackling this challenge.





**SchoolHouse
Connection**

ABOUT SCHOOLHOUSE CONNECTION

SchoolHouse Connection (SHC) is a national non-profit organization working to overcome homelessness through education. We provide strategic advocacy and practical assistance in partnership with early childhood programs, schools, institutions of higher education, service providers, families, and youth. We believe education is the only permanent solution to homelessness. Our vision is that children and youth experiencing homelessness have full access to quality learning, birth through higher education, so they will never be homeless as adults, and the next generation will never be homeless.

SHC's key programs include federal policy advocacy; state policy advocacy; the Education Leads Home campaign; higher education; early childhood; and youth leadership and scholarship. Some highlights of our recent activities are available in our [2019 Year in Review](#), and our [Annual Reports](#) summarize our achievements and financial standing.



REFERENCES

i Chapin Hall (2018). [Missed Opportunities: Pregnant and Parenting Youth Experiencing Homelessness in America.](#)

ii Ibid.

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v Chapin Hall (2017). [Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America.](#)

vi Kull, Melissa A., Dworsky, Amy, Horwitz, Beth, Farrell, Anne F. (2019). [Developmental Consequences of Homelessness for Young Parents and Their Children.](#) ZERO TO THREE, v39 n4 p60-66 Mar 2019.

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